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ABSTRACT

Educators in the late 1960s and early 1970s found that 8 mm film loop cartridges encouraged learning techniques such as self-tutorials, individualized instruction, and small-group participation. The single concept approach used in the production of most 8 mm cartridges contributed to alternative learning strategies in these settings. The simplicity of the equipment, its portability, indestructibility, and low cost added to its popularity. Standard and Super 8 mm film loops and cartridge projectors were compared to books in terms of accessibility and were a strong promoter of visual communication. For all this, however, they remained only a short time on the educational scene. Lack of standardization and versatility, plus a number of economic and social issues, translated into early extinction for this non-print medium. For example, an analysis of gender in 68 film loops revealed that it was possible to find a male in a "feminine" role or in a more neutral role; however, while women, too, were portrayed in gendered roles as well as in neutral roles, no women were found in subject areas seen as masculine. These perceptions reflect the times in which the film loops were created and produced: an era in which the gender gap was only beginning to decline. Regardless of their short life span, the existence of the 8 mm film loops on the audiovisual scene makes them a part of educational technology history. (Contains 40 references.) (AEF)

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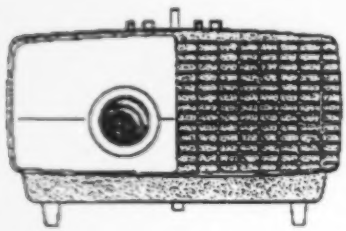
ED 408 967

The Development And Demise Of 8 MM Film Loops In America

by Rebecca P. Butler

Abstract

In this paper, I looked historically at the primarily visual medium known as the 8 mm film loop, why and how it developed, and what contributed to its decline. In addition, I studied a variety of these film loops to ascertain whether or not gender representations of the time applied to this medium, and thus to visual and educational technology in general.



Introduction

In the early 1970s, as a college student studying to be a school library media specialist, one of my biggest fears was learning how to use audiovisual hardware and software properly. Because I had grown up in a rural area with little instructional technology in the schools, the thought of a diazo transparency, dry mount press, or laminator sent shivers up and down my spine. Especially anathema to me was the 16 mm projector. I approached this piece of hardware with fear and was soon reduced to sneaking out of the university's hardware demonstration area after ruining yet another practice film. It was then that I discovered a fantastic machine -- the 8 mm film loop (cartridge) projector! Together with its corresponding software, I was suddenly invincible! I could teach with technology! I could pick it up and carry it from room to room, from home to school. And best of all, it made me unafraid. Once I had proven to myself that I could master that one piece of equipment, I now knew that I could learn the others as well. Today, the chances of finding an 8 mm or Super 8 mm projector and/or compatible software are slim. If one is lucky -- or unlucky enough to do so -- they are usually found tucked into a corner of some forgotten closet, covered with dust and spider webs. And yet, at one time this almost wholly visual medium was toted as the library's non print answer to the book. What happened?

8 and Super 8 Film Loops

"Some educators have called the 8 mm cartridge film the 'paperback' of the film format since it is so readily available, so inexpensive (compared with the more common 16 mm films), and so easy to use" (Gerlach and Ely, 1971, p. 347).

While 8 mm films could be in open-reel form, the more popular 8 mm format (in its heyday in the late sixties and early seventies) was the endless film loop (also called the film cartridge). Housed in a cartridge and never removed except for cleaning and/or repair, it was very easy to use. Employed most often for educational or training purposes, the student or teacher simply inserted the cartridge into the projector and turned the machine on. The film, itself, was never touched and never needed to be threaded into the projector. In addition, film loops/cartridge films were easy to store. Available at first in a black and white, silent format -- and later also in color and sound -- the silent, one-concept film loop, proved the most popular. This popularity may have been because of its cost: as little as $8.00 per film (compared to approximately $35.00 for sound film loops), plus the fact that it could be used in a busy classroom with little disruption to the rest of the students (Gerlach and Ely, 1971; Reinhart, 1974; Romiszowski, 1988). Additionally, all 8 mm film loops were three to four minutes in length. There were inconsistencies among film loops, however. The dissimilarities between the Standard (also called the 'regular 8 mm film loop' or just the '8 mm film loop') and Super 8 mm

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cartridge films was the most prominent example.

Introduced in 1966 by Eastman Kodak (Wittich and Schuller, 1973, p. 452), the Super 8 mm film cartridge was faster than its older counterpart. Speed: 16 frames per second for the standard film loop compared to 18 frames per second for the Super 8 film, made the Super 8 mm film loop more popular. Another difference was in the size of sprocket holes. Because Super 8 mm film reduced the size of the holes, it was able to obtain more room for each picture than was the Standard 8. This resulted in a better picture for Super 8 mm films (Romiszowski, 1988). Indeed the better quality pictures produced by the Super 8s soon put them in the lead for educational uses. As Wittich and Schuller stated in 1973, "More than 100 film producers throughout the world, most of them long experienced in the production of 16mm silent and sound films, are now engaged in producing silent 8mm film cartridges on various subjects.....the subject of 8mm films parallel closely those available in 16mm film" (p. 454).

A Short History.....

"....the portable machine period.....is probably the most important thing that 8 mm has been used for" (Forsdale, 1979).

The 8 mm film loop was first introduced into the United States in the early 1960s. According to C. Louis Forsdale (1979), he was approached by the head of the Horace Mann Lincoln Institute for School Research at Teachers' College, Columbia University and asked if he would be interested in funding to do research on a Japanese 8 mm cartridge loading projector. After looking at the drawings -- there was not yet a prototype for the machine -- Forsdale agreed. Thus for a period of approximately seven years, Forsdale spend half his time investigating the possibilities inherent with 8 mm film. As he later stated to Bill Hugg, who interviewed him as part of the 1970 Educational Communications and Technology (ECT) Oral History Project, "....the basic idea which we had in mind....in those days can best be expressed in the phrase, 'the accessible moving image.' We made it very clear to ourselves that we didn't really care in what form that accessible moving image came, as long as it truly was accessible" (Forsdale, 1979).

To Forsdale and his colleagues, accessibility meant that anyone -- even a young child -- could use the medium. Because film at that time had a lead over television, preliminary thought was that 16 mm cartridge loading projectors might also be developed. A study of three such prototypes soon proved, however, that this was not economically possible. (16 mm cartridges cost more than the film they contained, and needed power within the cartridge to move the film into the projector.) After talking to a number of engineers, Forsdale came to the conclusion that the largest feasible gauge of film that could be placed in a cartridge and moved passively through the projector by claw action alone was the 8 mm. The 8 mm cartridge was also less expensive: fifty cents compared to $25.00 for a 16 mm cartridge (Forsdale, 1979). Thus 8 mm film loops and cartridge projectors began their ascent in the annals of American education. Indeed, as late as 1973, Walt Wittich and Charles Schuller, authors of the fifth edition of Instructional Technology: Its Nature and Use, state that 8 mm film production in the early 1970s is outstripping 16 mm titles and that "With the exception of the cassette tape recorder, the 8mm silent loop cartridge projector is the piece of audiovisual equipment most frequently added to the equipment of schools" (Wittich and Schuller, 1973, p. 473).

Development

Educators in the late sixties and early seventies found that 8 mm film loop cartridges encouraged learning techniques such as self-tutorials, individualized instruction, and small group participation. The simplicity of the 8 mm equipment and materials ensured that almost any age group from about 4 years on could be comfortable in its usage. Its portability, indestructibility (both the hardware and software were hard to damage), and low cost also added to its popularity. In addition, the single concept approach used in the production of most 8 mm cartridges, contributed to alternative learning strategies in

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small group and individualized instruction (Wittich and Schuller, 1973). Also to come out of the 8 mm concept was using visual communication to its best potential. This was a direct result of the *short length* of *silent* 8 mm film cartridges. As Romiszowski (1988, p. 172) says, ".....many instructional situations may actually benefit from very short self-contained presentations and from reduction or indeed total elimination of the audio commentary." Thus, the 8 mm concept strongly promoted a wordless instructional medium.

Demise

In the mid to late seventies, the Standard and Super 8 mm film loops/cartridges began to go into a decline. Reasons included: (1) many schools and libraries had already made an investment in 16 mm equipment; (2) many producers were unwilling to make the shifts necessary to develop 8 mm prints from 16 mm negatives; and (3) the advent of the videocassette made the film loop less versatile and more expensive (Romiszowski, 1988, p. 171). In addition, there were other concerns.

Another problem was that dealing with multiple film loops on exceedingly more difficult parts of the same subject. In such cases, it was not uncommon that only the first loop contained the title and introduction, and additional loops might not have a recapping of the previous film (Iowa State University, n.d., Preparation of less tender beef cuts, Parts 1, 2, and 3; Iowa State University, n.d., Preparation of tender beef cuts, Parts 1, 2, 3, and 4). Such lack of information feasibly caused confusion among users.

Yet another problem was the absence of standards between the various companies which produced Standard and Super 8 mm hardware and software. "It is a higher quality medium, Super 8 ..... than regular 8, but that also stalled the development of the 8 mm movement, for whatever you're going to buy, Super 8, regular 8...." (Forsdale, 1979). The standardization issue also killed a dream of Eastman Kodak's John Florry. Florry's vision was to make thousands of 8 mm prints which could be sold to schools inexpensively. However, "....it's one that never came to pass .... because the laboratories had great difficulty in deciding ..... which standards to go with what kind of a machine" (Forsdale, 1979). Forsdale also stated that he felt people were concerned the 8mm quality was not good enough for a whole class size (unlike 16 mm films and film projectors which worked well with large groups). But, said Forsdale (1979), that factor was ".....more in peoples' heads than it was in terms of the actual capability of the film" (Forsdale, 1979). Forsdale then described "a specially built arc projector," for Super 8 mm film on thirty foot screens that created "beautiful, beautiful images" (Forsdale, 1979). However, the dilemma of which way to go in the film loop market continued, and ultimately, the short life of 8 mm hardware and software drew to a close.

Conclusion: Generalities

Although Standard and Super 8 mm film loops and cartridge projectors were compared to a book in terms of accessibility and were a strong promoter of visual instruction, they remained only a short time on the educational scene.[1] Lack of standardization and versatility, plus a number of economic issues, translated into early extinction for this non-print medium.[1]

Gender Analysis of Studied Super 8 MM Film Loops

Why and How

Why analyze gender issues in an audiovisual medium that has not survived the test of time? Perhaps this is best understood with my dissertation research, Women in Audiovisual Education, 1920-1957: A Discourse Analysis (Butler, 1995), in mind. While doing this research, I became interested in the roles played historically by women and men within the field of audiovisual education. Thus, when I began viewing the many 8 mm film loops used for this study, I found that I was constantly aware of the sex of the characters in each film cartridge. Because all of the film loops I analyzed were silent, it was impossible to attempt a discourse analysis. However, it was possible to visually place where and how men and women were portrayed within the subject content of each film loop.

The film loops used in this study were originally purchased by a university Instructional Media Center. When personnel of this IMC expressed an interest in removing these materials from circulation, I immediately said that I would take the entire film loop collection. As a result, I found myself with eighty-seven 8 mm film loops, some Standard and some Super 8. I next pursued finding the hardware on which to view this software. Only one machine on campus proved able to show any of these films: a silent Super 8 mm cartridge projector. Because parts of my collection were other than Super 8 mm film loops, the study size immediately shrank to sixty-eight cartridges. Those left were all Super 8 mm silent films. My next action was to view each film loop with a number of criteria in mind.

In order to analyze all film loops in a similar manner, I created a short evaluation form which included the following areas:

1) Title
2) Copyright date
3) Publisher/producer
4) Documentation
5) Length
6) Content
7) Black and white or color
8) Gender issues

a) Are the individuals shown male or female?

b) What are they wearing? (i.e., Is what the person wearing affirming his/her sex?)

c) What is each individual doing in the film?

d) If only hands are shown, can an educated "guess" be made as to the sex of the individual? If so, what is the criteria for making this "guess?"

What I Found

Using the above evaluation criteria, several generalizations were made: (1) the majority of the film loops were produced in either the late 1960s or the early 1970s; (2) while a variety of publishers were represented in the collection, most of the film loops came from one of three places: BFA Educational Media, Film Associates, or Iowa State University; (3) the majority had little or no documentation; (4) all loops were between three and four minutes in length; (5) although on a variety of subjects -- such as art, science, biology, outer space, or food preparation -- all cartridges were instructional; (6) while all loops were silent, a few did have text on the screen, thus explaining what the viewer was seeing; and (7) all were in color.

Gender Issues

Almost two-thirds of the film loops contained people. Of these, all were composed of one adult person, excepting for one film loop which contained a group of boys and girls (Herberholz, D. and Filby, L., Puppet stages, n.d.). I determined the sex of each person in the films, when possible, based on his/her physical characteristics, wearing apparel, hair style, and/or jewelry. These determinations were established, given my perceptions of masculine and feminine characteristics in our culture, especially during the time period under study. [The late sixties and early seventies were part of an age where women were demanding, but not always receiving, equality in the work force and society, in general (Baxandall, et al., 1976)]. In some instances, it was not possible to determine the sex of an individual -- for example, when all that could be seen were parts of someone's fingers. However, when possible, observations were made concerning sex and gender assignments. For example, in all food preparation films, the individuals shown were female (Iowa State University, 1971; Iowa State University, 1972). In film loops dealing with science and/or experiments, only males were shown (Adler, 1969; Herbert, 1968; Walters, 1967). And in some film loops, such as Stitchery I and II (n.d.), males were depicted demonstrating the activity -- even though sewing was more likely to be considered a "typical" female occupation (Tierney, 1991, p. 392) in the sixties and seventies. Possibly this assignment of a member of the opposing sex to a gendered role may have been an anomaly, or perhaps it was a reply to women in the seventies who demanded female equality (Solomon, 1985, p. 188). Still another reason may have been a visual extension of a verbal message of the time, which placed men or male terminology in roles in which a specific sex was not determined (Black and Cow-

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ard, 1981). Without interviewing those who wrote and developed these film cartridges, it is impossible to specifically determine why such choices were made.

Conclusion: Gender Issues

Altogether, twenty-two film loops contained a male interacting with the subject environment, and sixteen cartridges consisted of women demonstrating a skill or technique. In addition, one loop contained both girls and boys; seventeen were composed of individuals whose sex I was unable to determine; and twelve had no humans involved in the instructional process. In the studied film loops, it was possible to find a male in a "feminine" role (see above discussion) or in a more neutral role, such as an art teacher/demonstrator. However, while women, too, were portrayed in gendered roles such as cooking or meat cutting, as well as in neutral roles (for example collage construction), no women were found in subject areas seen as masculine (scientist, etc.). These perceptions reflect the times in which the studied film loops were created and produced: a era where politically the gender gap was beginning to, but had not yet declined (Hartman, 1989, p. 72).

Conclusion

Regardless of the fact that 8 mm film loops and projectors had a short life span, their existence on the audiovisual scene makes them a viable part of our visual literacy and educational technology history. Gender issues within this medium provide us with another view on a past era. As C. Louis Forsdale (1979), one of the fathers of the American 8 mm film loop concept said, "we....believed....that if the moving image was indeed accessible to everybody: child, teacher, housewife, anybody, that it would then come closer to the role that the book has played, and the book has played its role in large measure....because it is accessible."

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[1] By the time C. Louis Forsdale was interviewed for the ECT oral history tapes in 1979, 8 mm film loops and projectors were no longer a constant in education. Instead, growth in this format had taken a new turn: away from the K-12 curriculum and towards hard core pornography: "By the way, fascinating little side note on this thing. I don't have any figures on this but I would be willing to guess that maybe the greatest market for Super 8 mm distribution in this country is hard core pornography. And I literally mean that. The pornographic field, the sales stores, have gone in the direction of 8 mm and Super 8 mm, and from what I gather their turnover is very large indeed" (Forsdale, 1979).

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